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## EMPHASIZING EDUCATION AS AN INDIVIDUAL TASK

### *POUDARJANJE INDIVIDUALNIH CILJEV IZOBRAŽEVANJA*

Avtor izhaja iz ugotovitve, da so, za razliko od zadnjega (enotnega) kurikulumu, ki je na Finskem veljal do leta 1985, kjer so bili individualni in socialni cilji še uravnoteženi, novejša pobude v šolstvu naravnane izrazito v smeri individualnih izobraževalnih ciljev.

Kot primera analizira izobraževalni pobudi/inovaciji na Finskem v devetdesetih: nacionalne smernice predšolskega kurikulumu (za 6-letne otroke) in eksperimentalno uvajanje homogenega grupiranja otrok v skupine po sposobnostih.

Oba primera zato analizira z vidika prisotnosti socialnih ciljev ter kritično ugotavlja, da je le 6 od 31 splošnih ciljev nacionalnih smernic za predšolski kurikulum socialne narave. Na drugi strani pa tudi poskus homogenega grupiranja zanemara socialne vidike, saj gre v bistvu za princip šole brez stalnih oddelkov, kjer otrok napreduje glede na individualne cilje in tako v bistvu ne pripada nobeni socialni skupini (razredu), saj jih pogosto menja.

V občasnih skupinah se socialni odnosi, značilni in pomembni za socialne skupine, niti ne morejo razviti. Poudarjeni pa so individualni cilji - ko jih učenec doseže, napreduje ne glede na starost in skupino.

Avtor ugotavlja, da v takem sistemu seveda ni prostora za vrednote, kot so socialna odgovornost, sodelovanje, altruizem, vzajemna pomoč in druge socialne prvine izobraževanja. Opozarja, da v teh primerih izgubljammo možnost za demokratične vidike izobraževanja, ker demokratičnih odnosov ni mogoče razviti le v družini, ob učitelju ter občasni sošolci.

Za Finsko pa je sicer v splošnem značilen urejen predšolski in obvezni šolski sistem in večina otrok je vključena v javne šole s klasičnim sistemom heterogenih oddelkov, kjer obstajajo vse možnosti tudi za uresničevanje socialnih ciljev izobraževanja, ne da bi ob tem zanemarili doseganje individualnih (kognitivnih) ciljev.

Po avtorjevem mnenju namreč pluralna, demokratična družba zahteva, da so tudi v šolskem sistemu prisotni cilji (živeti in učiti se skupaj ne glede na rasne, etnične, religiozne ali druge razlike), ki jih taka družba tudi sicer želi doseči.

## THE THEME OF THE NINETIES IN FINLAND

### BACKGROUND

In the late 1960s, the Finnish primary and lower secondary schools were totally reformed. A debate on the aims and forms of the new schools was started as early as the late 1950s. In the 1960s Parliament members also participated very actively in this debate, and demands for democratic schooling and for equal educational opportunities were the main arguments expressed when the Comprehensive School Act was passed in 1968. The result of the reform was a nine-year basic education, where primary teachers (classroom teachers) have the first six grades (primary level) and secondary teachers (subject teachers) have the remaining three grades (lower secondary level).

The school reform brought about the revision of the old curricula. The curriculum of the elementary school (grades 1 - 9) was ready in 1970. It was a subject-based curriculum and was the last national curriculum in the Finnish compulsory education system. Since 1985 only the outlines for a curriculum have been given by the Ministry of Education; the details of the curriculum are presently planned at the

local level. However, by means of the national frameworks of curricula and the financial supporting of certain kinds of educational experimentations the advocates of the administration nevertheless affect the nature of the educative process in day care centers and comprehensive schools.

The writer concludes that when the individual and social aims of education in the 1970s - and still in the 1980s - were quite well balanced in the Finnish system of education (c.f. Committee Report 1970: A4, 23-24) the advocates of the administration in the 1990s assume that education means mainly individualized learning. They don't insist any more that the school (or a day care center) itself could be a real community, exhibiting numerous shared interests and open communication (c.f. Dewey 1943, 1966). Two examples of the Finnish education policy of the 1990s will be analyzed: the National Framework of Curriculum for Preschool Education (1996) and experiments with homogenous grouping of children (i.e. "express streaming", where day care centers and schools offer some children in a group or in a class possibilities to speed up their progress in education).

## **THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF CURRICULUM FOR PRESCHOOL EDUCATION**

Social education has traditionally been one of the strengths of the Finnish early childhood education. In the National Framework of the Curriculum for Preschool Education (1996, 22-23) the aims are evenly divided to cognitive, affective and psychomotor sentences. However, the educational process is in the document emphatically seen as an individual event. When each aim sentence is classified as individual or as social in its content one can find out that only six of the 31 sentences represent social aims.

The writer has classified the following six aims as social:

- the learning context should develop a child's
  - "ability to estimate the value of her/his and others' acts in an ethical angle of vision and grow in the consciousness of ethical responsibility"
- in the learning context a child should learn
  - "practical skills to act in a social community"
  - "to respect her/his and others' work"
  - "to take a positive stand toward other people and other cultures"
  - "good manners"
- the learning context should offer a child possibilities
  - "to grow to be honest, kind and altruistic"

Synthetically, one can conclude that the social aims of the Finnish preschool education are quite superficial by nature. A child should learn social skills she/he needs in social situations. Her/his ability to estimate ethical values should be developed. She/he learns to take a positive attitude toward other people, their work and their culture. However, the real process of social living remains outside of the aims. In the aims a child, actually, doesn't meet another child or adult. The meaningful and deep touch of interaction between people is missing from the aims. The aims also lack emotions and joy. A child, for instance, doesn't "learn to engage to common activities with other children", "learn to work with all children", "experience success and joy with other children" or "learn to help and support other children".

## **UNGRADED SCHOOLING: A THEME OF THE 1990s**

The first experiments with ungraded schooling (i.e. "express streaming", where schools offer some children in a class possibilities to speed up their progress in schooling) were being conducted in the Finnish upper secondary school already in the early 1970s. At present, a noticeable part of the Finnish upper secondary schools are working according to the principle of ungradedness. In the 1990s some primary schools have been interested in ungraded schooling. Pedagogical solutions of the same kind have lately also been proposed to preschool teachers working at the preprimary level.

Ungraded schooling means that newcomers to school or even children in preschools can, in these experimentations, start their regular attendance at school without being a member of a secure environment with a stable group of children (c.f. Merimaa 1996). A child can join a group - according to her/his needs and abilities - on certain occasions and when studying certain subjects that some other groups of children are studying which are different from their own group. Mostly those children who are competent benefit from ungraded schooling: they can speed up their studying. Less competent

children - usually from socially disadvantaged groups (from immigrant families etc.) - have to stay in the core group.

Ungraded schooling should not be confused with grade combinations. In Finland we have a lot of small preprimary and primary schools - mostly in the countryside - where children of different age groups are studying in the same classroom. This usually means combinations of grade levels 0-1, 0-2, 1-2, 3-4 or 3-6, although other combinations are also possible. An essential difference in an ungraded class as compared to a grade combination is that, in the latter, children form a stable group for the period of one school year.

Instead of differentiating the teaching-learning process in a solid core group of children (e.g. by means of different kinds of tasks or duties, by means of cooperative learning, etc.), the supporters of ungraded schooling break down the traditional class formation. According to the dilemma language proposed by Berlak and Berlak (1981, 154-155) an ungraded Finnish preprimary or primary school emphasizes, from the very beginning, learning as an individual task and attributes very little to learning as a social task. From the individual perspective learning is a private encounter between child and material or between child and teacher. From the social perspective learning proceeds best - most efficiently and effectively - if there is interaction among the persons learning.

In an unstable group (in an ungraded class, for instance), preference has been given to the individualistic goals of autonomy and capability. The rapidity of your school attendance - e.g. how soon you reach the courses of the "next grade" - depends as a matter of fact totally on how good you are in the "basics". Mere interest in studying some subject area is not enough because the system demands that a student be a good individual learner. Neither will social responsibility, altruism, collective participation nor moral virtues help one to progress faster in her/his studies.

It is, of course, possible to emphasize learning as social in an ungraded school, too. At least you have a group of students with you during the lessons even if it is not a stable one. Thus, you are able to organize the work according to different kinds of group formations. However, the teaching-learning process is in some respects insufficient. Unstable, varying groups do not have - as a whole - common interests or shared concerns, which are important for forming and maintaining the solidarity of any social group. Dewey (1966, 358) sees this very clearly when he writes that "the measure of the worth of the administration, curriculum, and methods of instruction of the school is the extent to which they are animated by a social spirit. And the great danger which threatens school work is the absence of conditions which make possible a permeating social spirit; this is the great enemy of effective moral training." When some children - and mostly the same ones - are moving to and from the core group, the conditions put forth by Dewey are threatened.

## PROBLEMS IN INDIVIDUALITY EMPHASIZING EDUCATION

Behind the two opponent terms of the dilemma language used by Berlak and Berlak (1981, 154-155) (i.e. learning is individual v. learning is social), one often finds different kinds of pedagogical practices derived from two different aims - or traditions - of education (see, e.g. Cagan 1978): the goals of freedom, autonomy and personal liberation on the one hand, and the goals of social responsibility, altruism and collective participation on the other. Dearden (1984, 110) presents a similar view: "When I wrote my *Philosophy of Primary Education* (in 1968) I was at my most optimistic, hoping that at least the broad outlines of the curriculum could somehow be derived from autonomy as the central principle of education. I no longer think that. It now seems to me obvious that at least morality requires a separate root, since it is perfectly possible, conceptually, for a person to be highly autonomous yet amoral. The rational egoist is a case in point."

Dunlop (1986) asks how the promotion of autonomy might be thought to be incompatible with the education of emotions. His statements assert that the question cannot be of the form either autonomy (self-conscious thought and will) or emotion and feeling. Human life requires both. What we have to do is somehow *get our heads down* again, by ceasing to be obsessed by efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and other similar *rational* values and turning more towards useless thought fulfilling things like beauty, dignity, nobility, radiant goodness, faithfulness and other unfashionable virtues.

Smith (1993, 7) sees that school should have an active role in changing and developing a democratic society. "Places where children might learn what it means to become responsible participants in adult society have become scarce. Schools remain one of the few sites in our society where children are able to experience an ongoing social relationship with a group of people that extends beyond their immediate family and friends. As neighborhoods, churches, and even nuclear families have become more ephemeral and less significant in the lives of children --- , there are fewer and fewer places where the continuous and close relationships that characterize well-functioning

communities can be encountered in our common life. If children are to learn what it means to live in interdependent and successfully functioning groups, schools may be one of the few places where these lessons can be mastered."

Communal solidarity is only one element of the educative process that we lose in individuality emphasizing education. We also lose the democratic mode of education. Parents or teachers cannot simply *give* their children a democratic society. A democratic way of life must be one where the future citizens live encompassed by it, by accepting and identifying it as their own. A democratic education cultivates the capacity to carefully weight out decisions and to develop social responsibility in children. As Gutmann (1993) states, "Education entails authority, but democratic educational authorities must prepare children for self-governance while they are being governed." Democratic schools are called as such because they teach children self-governance and democratic virtues.

In Finland we have strong preprimary and compulsory education systems in action. Practically all the children in voluntary preschools and all the children in any age group in mandatory primary schools get their education in municipal day care centers and elementary schools. We have only a few Waldorf -schools and some special schools whose foundation is built on foreign language, religious movement, etc. Thus, the circumstances for democratic education have been - and still are - suitable. Children in a traditional, graded group make up a cross section of the whole society. It is possible for a teacher - throughout the entire preprimary and primary levels - to give every child opportunities to get her/himself acquainted with the democratic way of life. Ungraded schooling, as an alternative, gives some children priorities according to their individual skills and abilities but, at the same time, loses its potential to be an ideal, miniature democracy.

In conclusion, more emphasis should be placed on learning as a social task. That, however, does not mean that learning as individual should be de-emphasized. At least at the preprimary and primary levels every child should experience learning *both* as a social *and* as an individual task. This demand can more easily be reached in a stable group of children than in an unstable one. Also a curriculum where individual and social aims of education are well balanced is needed.

Soltis (1991) explicates the idea above excellently when he writes: "A learning environment must be provided that nurtures understanding and respect for others and cooperative learning experiences as well as creates a ground for individually meaningful learning experiences. Structurally, in a pluralistic society where tensions between groups exist, special mixed schools could be created to bring students from many ethnic, racial, religious and other groups to study and learn together, to form up embryonic democratic communities that honor and prize diversity because of what can be accomplished by a multitiered group and individual effort. *The social structure of the school must reflect the form of social organization a society seeks to achieve.*"

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